

IDENTIFYING SPECIFIC EARLY DIFFICULTIES

Autistic spectrum disorder: Occasionally the behaviour of young children confuses even experienced practitioners. It is not just confronting but also has elements of the bizarre. These children need careful monitoring as a number of related difficulties may surface. The list below outlines a number of indications that the child may be on the autistic spectrum. This realisation can cause grief and anxiety for parents who will need a great deal of support. You cannot insist parents acknowledge their child's special needs, you must wait for them to come to this understanding in their own time.

The following behaviours may be observed in children on the autistic spectrum. Seek advice if several of these are present:

- Under-developed social skills – treating others as objects
- Lack of empathy – does not tune into emotional content of communication
- Often in a world of their own
- Lack of symbolic play – lines up small toys rather than enacts scenes with them
- Repetitive, sometimes ritualistic behaviour such as hand flapping or spinning
- Strong interests, bordering on the obsessive
- Resistance to changes in routine
- Panic reactions at times
- Sensory sensitivity – may react strongly to touch, noise or smell
- Exceptionally strong preferences and dislikes – such as the way food is presented
- Unusual behaviour, such as smelling everything.

Although a few children on the autistic spectrum have a specific skill such as piano playing or recalling dates others often have learning difficulties. Children with average intelligence, showing particular difficulties in social interaction and perhaps milder indications of other difficulties are said to have Asperger's Syndrome.

Learning difficulties: When immature social behaviour appears alongside slow acquisition of new learning this may indicate a general learning difficulty, sometimes referred to as developmental delay. This term is misleading as delay suggests an eventual catching up. Although there is continual progress, learning proceeds more slowly than the norm and therefore the gap widens rather than closes over time. Often it is behaviour that alerts educators to a learning difficulty. This requires careful monitoring and sensitive interactions with families. Beware jumping to conclusions.